

US Historic Preservation Assistance to India

William R. Chapman

Historic preservation could be seen as an extremely secondary concern for countries such as India. Problems of population growth, education, employment, and health would on the surface appear to be the obvious priorities. However, it is not that simple. While immediate human needs are compelling, the preservation of historic resources cannot wait until some unspecified, and presumably more economically secure, future date. Also, historic preservation, including simply the reuse or continuing use of existing structures, as well as the development for tourism purposes of both utilitarian and less utilitarian properties—the many religious cave complexes of the state of Maharashtra especially come to mind—are inextricably bound up with the lives and economies of places such as Bombay and its surrounding region. Old buildings still serve as houses, offices, and institutions. Tourists visit Bombay, and spend much-needed hard currency, to visit the caves of Elephanta, Kanheri, and especially Ajanta and Ellora—themselves the recent focus of a US National Park Service cooperative development study.✦

The problem of preservation in Bombay and other sections of the State of Maharashtra in West-Central India have been the subject of a recent project sponsored by US/ICOMOS and funded by the United States Information Agency (USIA). As a follow-up to a USIA-sponsored Citizens Exchange project focusing on US approaches to historic preservation, the Indian participants, including Dr. Sadashiv Goraskshkar (Director of

the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay), invited US/ICOMOS to send two US historic preservation practitioners to Bombay and several other sites to give advice on local problems. Former Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Robertson Collins (and now a Vice-President of the Pacific Area Travel Association), and myself—formerly a professor in the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Georgia—were asked to represent the US. Both of us are members of the Board of Trustees of US/ICOMOS.

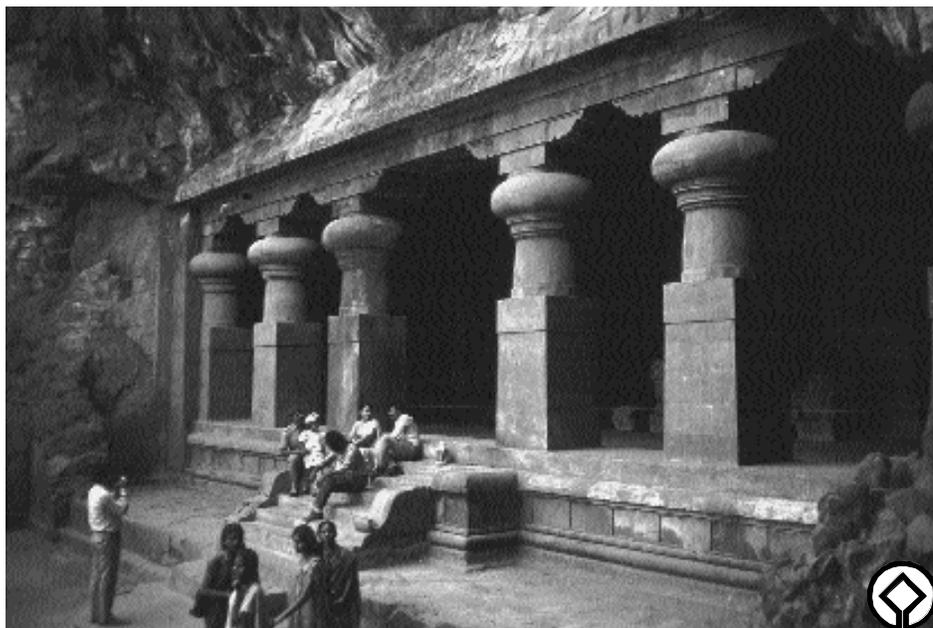
Taking place over a month-long period in the early part of 1992, the program included a series of workshops and lectures in Bombay, at the Elephanta cave complex and the nearby Kanheri Caves, and at Pune (formerly Poona, an English colonial summer capital), which is about 100 miles southeast of Bombay. Participants included local government officials, architects and planners, preservation advocates, and representatives of Indian historic preservation organizations—particularly the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). Sponsorship was also provided by the Maharashtra Tourism Office.

The aim overall was to focus on steps that local advocates and officials could take in beginning a more “proactive” preservation program and to provide legal and administrative advice on proposed local preservation ordinances. Most importantly, the various talks and workshops provided a general forum for discussion of problems and an opportunity for local preservation and governmental officials to meet together within the same walls—something which, surprisingly, had not occurred before.

Bombay is a truly remarkable city. With its population of almost 12 million people—fully 4-5 million of whom live either in the severely inadequate “hutments” or slums, on the streets or in the doorways and hallways of existing buildings—the problems of Bombay seem overwhelming to the first-time visitor. The air is acrid with the smoke of cooking fires and

burning refuse; roads are in disarray, sidewalks torn up; and raw sewage flows down eroded embankments into pools of standing water. Still, there is a vitality, enthusiasm, and cheerfulness which often seems at odds with social and economic conditions.

Bombay began as a fishing village and evolved into an important Parsi (Persian-dominated) trading city during the 16th and 17th centuries; it became a capital of Western India during the period of British power on the sub-continent. Beginning in the late-17th and early-18th centuries with the building of an array of government and commercial buildings, Bombay became a true focus of architectural enterprise during the mid-to-late 19th century, or during the peak years of the British Imperial presence. As a result, Bombay possesses



The Hindu Elephanta Caves near Bombay date from the 6th century A.D. Photo by the author (February 1992).

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an incomparable collection of High Victorian Gothic and later “Anglo-Indian” buildings, many by leading English architects. In addition to these imperial “set pieces,” the city possesses a wealth of urbanistic architecture, with street after street of simply “well-mannered” buildings representing a wide range of architectural styles. There are also large sections of industrial housing, a product of Bombay’s longstanding textile industry, and many blocks of Art Deco and Moderne-inspired buildings—the last major “historic” addition to the city from the relatively affluent 1920s through the last burst of building activity in the early 1940s.

All of these structures, as well as their contexts, are severely threatened, both through neglect and constantly changing social and economic factors. The larger Victorian buildings suffer the expected problems: poor or improper maintenance and over-use. Commercial buildings are often over-crowded; apartment buildings are also over-crowded or abandoned entirely, due to a pattern of landlord disinvestment.

Aggravated by well-intentioned, though ultimately harmful rent controls, set as early as the late 1940s, most of Bombay’s historic buildings are on the brink of ruin. In the meantime, newer buildings nibble away at the historic core, a process driven by high ground rents and often outside investment.

The city of Bombay and its supporters have been working for several years to bring the future of its older buildings under some kind of control. As in the US, there has been considerable resistance from owners and developers, though occasionally there has been support from them. The government, on the other hand, has been reluctant to address major issues, such as rent control, preferring overall to address what it sees as the important problems of social well-being and the economy. Initial steps have been taken, both through government initiative and through the pressure of advocacy organizations, such as the Save Bombay group, to create a basic inventory of historic properties. Following British precedence, properties have been listed by “class,” according to their relative architectural significance. There are also recommended “conservation areas,” comparable to US historic districts, on the inventory. At the time of this writing (1992), a conservation ordinance for the city is under consideration, which would incorporate the basic list of approximately 600 structures and small, mainly block-length districts or conservation areas. Resistance is expected, but most officials believe that some type of provision will be made.



Victoria Terminus, Bombay; F.W. Stevens, architect; 1878-87. Photo by the author (February 1992).

Actual management of the many resources will be another matter. Many buildings are in extremely poor physical condition. Controlled rent levels often discourage repairs. Repairs, when made, are often undertaken through a government-sponsored program, which tends only to address severely deteriorated structures and then follow unadvisable treatments. Larger institutional buildings, mostly government owned, have been floodlit for effect in recent years—an important public relations victory for preservationists—but still in most cases these structures lack basic maintenance. Unless some way is devised to tie restoration and rehabilitation into the on-going economic life of the city, many more buildings will be lost or altered beyond recognition. The impressive Victoria Terminus is the exception; it has been restored within the last five years almost to its original condition.

Historic architecture and districts in other cities in the state of Maharashtra face similar futures. Pune, with its population of approximately 1.5 million, is in many ways a miniature version of Bombay. The former summer colony of the Bombay governor, Pune also has a wealth of high-style Victorian buildings including the former governor’s residence, now the center of the university; an agricultural college; administrative buildings; and an extensive cantonment area, still used by the Indian military. Pune also has a superb collection of suburban “bungalows,” once the mansions of British administrators, as well as significant remnants of the Peshwa kings, who ruled this section of India until their defeat by the British in 1817.

As with Bombay, Pune faces the joint problems of too much change and too little appropriate investment. In fact, 18th-century commercial and residential buildings are gradually altered and rebuilt, eroding their historic value. The older and impressive institutional buildings lack basic maintenance. The cantonment area is managed for the army’s convenience, not with an eye toward its historic value. The tourism potential of the city is little explored or understood. Other than the well-maintained Agakhan Palace, the historic site of Gandhi’s internment during the turbulent 1940s, the Victorian-era buildings are little promoted as potential tourist attractions. The same is true throughout the state of Maharashtra, where smaller cities face a gradual loss of historic character and the more immediate loss of significant historic structures.

The combined US/ICOMOS-USIA project resulted in a number of recommendations presented both to advocates and government officials. These focused on urban

conservation issues, as well as on the development of nearby tourism sites, including the Elephanta Caves (a Hindu site dating to the 6th century A.D.) and lesser-known Kanheri Caves (a Buddhist site dating to the 2nd century A.D.). The principal point made by the mission was simply the need to recognize the potential worth of historic architecture and sites in terms of development for tourism and resulting hard currency. The Victorian and Edwardian buildings of Bombay have yet to gain the world-wide attention that they deserve. It was recommended that the government and the tourism office continue in their efforts to highlight these buildings, both through continued funding for preservation and through future promotional material for the city. For funding, a greater reliance on private investment was presented as a priority. Government-owned buildings obviously would have to continue to rely on government funding. However, institutional buildings, such as the University or Wilson College—both outstanding Gothic Revival complexes—could begin to solicit money from now often well-placed alumni. For commercial properties, an abandonment, or at least modification of existing rent controls, was recommended.

The main thrust of our recommendations was that historic preservation need not be simply a luxury, one that at this point would seem impractical given India's social and economic conditions. Rather, it could be central to tourism development in Bombay and surrounding areas. As Robertson Collins emphasized, investment in older properties can help to preserve the unique character of cities and make them continuously popular tourist destinations. This was shown to be true in Singapore, where he now lives, and where preservation was supported as a key ingredient in the redevelopment of the historic core.

Note

✦ Barbara Goodman, et.al., *Ajanta and Ellora Heritage Sites: Conservation and Tourism Enhancement Plan*. (Washington, DC: National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, in press.) See also Ronald W. Cooksy and Barbara Goodman, "National Park Service Cooperation in India," *Federal Archeology Report* 4, 2 (June 1991), 1,3.

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tance and inter-dependence of these three elements in a system of preservation secures success in reaching the main goal, which is the restoration of harmonious relations between a human, cultural traditions, and environment; in other words, between a human, the past, and the future. The consciousness of a need for such a harmony became extinct gradually during the Industrial Revolution. The preservation movement, which started at the end of the 19th century, was the first comprehensive reaction to the destruction of cultural heritage and the natural environment which was caused by the technology-panacea oriented human. The only reasons for historic preservation predating the conservation of nature were the sequence and spectacularness of the damages: e.g., destruction of a palace was easier both to accomplish and to notice than the pollution of air, water, or soil. Far-reaching progress in peoples' attitudes toward culture and nature has taken place since then. Now there is more than just a common belief in the significance of preservation—gradually we have become conscious about the real reason for it, which is not just a need for saving things that are endangered, but a need of looking at ourselves as a component of a very complicated and sensitive wholeness in which our own survival depends on a secure balance with other components. There is a sense of that need implicit in American preservation of battlefields and that is why I would like to apply the American system in Poland. Some adjustments of the system to Polish conditions are necessary. These issues are now the main subjects of my doctoral thesis.

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